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OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2012

TAGA SPORTS

JEFF RACE FINDS FRESH JOY

WHAT'S IN A NICKNAME?

CRASH COURSE IN CANOEING

JOHANN NOETZEL IN 13 QUESTIONS

PLUS

GOLFING ON SAIPAN: A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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EDITOR'S NOTE

For someone with practically minimal upper body strength, rowing is not something that comes within the sphere of things I would possibly do in my spare time. Golf is another, as it requires spatial accuracy and hand-eye coordination—two more things that God in his infinite wisdom never saw fit to grant me. That makes my job easier, though, as I get to do all the assigning, ranting, and nagging needed to get the stories to their deadlines.

In this issue of TAGA *Sports*, it fell to staff writer Walter Cepeda Sutherland to try his hand at outrigger canoeing—a sport totally foreign to an admitted landlubber. He nearly lost his breakfast but got a story out of the whole exercise. ***See story on page 16.*** Walter also did a review of the five golf courses on Saipan and their relative merits and difficulties, easing the way for those unfamiliar with the terrain to figure out where they will be doing their weekend putts and drives. ***Story on Page 18.***

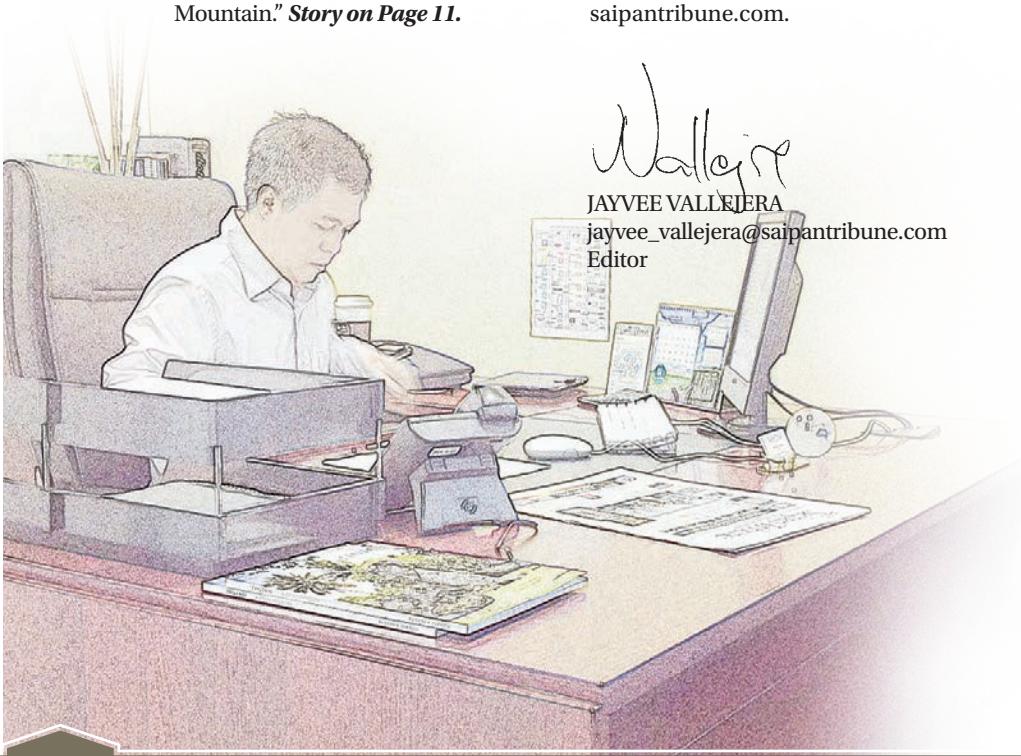
Associate editor Mark Rabago, a history buff, gets the back story on the various nicknames that abound in the local sporting world and even hands out a few of his own, giving us the tale of how famed sportsman Cuki Alvarez got the moniker "The Flying Cockroach" and why one basketball player took offense at being called "Man Mountain." ***Story on Page 11.***

Get to know one of the newer faces on island with our Q&A feature on Johann Noetzel. A former pro football goalkeeper, Noetzel is the Northern Mariana Islands Football Association's technical director but he also dreams of being a pro surfer. For this issue, he fields 13 questions from staff writer Roselyn Monroyo. ***See story on Page 6.***

In a field replete with giants, tennis legend Jeff Race is in a class of his own, making his name not only for the number of tournaments he'd won in the region but also for mentoring the sport's future legends. As captain of the Pacific Oceania Davis Cup team for six consecutive years, Race has become synonymous with tennis not only in the Northern Marianas but throughout the region. ***See story on Page 8.***

And then there's Joshua Taitano, whose feats in the swimming pool have become the benchmark for all up-and-coming CNMI swimmers. TAGA *Sports* managed to track down Taitano to Hawaii, where he is now into coaching and nurturing his own fleet of young swimmers. ***Story on Page 26***

We hope you will enjoy reading this edition of TAGA *Sports* as much as we enjoyed cobbling it together. For comments, violent reactions, criticisms, and suggestions for future issues, shoot us an email at editor@saipantribune.com.



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Editor

COVER ART
Jeff Race waits for a return from one of his students during a practice session at the Pacific Islands Club hard court in San Antonio.

Photography by
ROSELYN MONROYO

TAGA SPORTS

VOLUME 2 NO. 9
OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2012

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TAGA *Sports* is printed in Hong Kong.

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TAGA *Sports*
is published quarterly by the
Saipan Tribune Inc.
with offices on the
2nd Floor, JP Center, Beach Road,
Garapan, Saipan
To inquire about ad rates or to place an ad, call (670) 235-2440, 235-6397
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WRITERS BLOC

MARK RABAGO

Mark's basketball teammates in college used to call him Chuatico in reference to former Ateneo and Ginebra combo-guard Nonoy Chuatico. His heft, buzz cut, and, to a certain degree, his outside shooting prowess probably influenced the not-so-flattering *nom de guerre*. Last season saw Mark rekindle his lifelong love affair with basketball, capped by a 34-point explosion against POI in an inter-company league. "If my hot shooting continues through the second season, I may have to get myself a new nickname—'Locked and Loaded' seems appropriate," he said.

ROSELYN MONROYO

In the Philippines, the closest thing to a race to the finish line that Roselyn was able to do were "sack races" during her elementary days. More than her finishes, she remembers the bruises on her knees and arms from several falls in those races. On Saipan, she witnessed Jacque Wonenberg rise from the ranks, and in Palau she silently cheered for the CNMI while taking photos of Yvonne Bennett sprinting to the finish line of the 200m run in the 2010 Micronesian Games.

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND

After witnessing the record-breaking marlin that highlighted the SFA's International Fishing Tournament back July, Walter has been scouring through his contact list with hopes of having his very first deep-sea fishing experience. On land, he is looking forward to the start-up of the company basketball league after winning "most improved player" honors in the first go around.

Email letters to the editor to editor@saipantribune.com or mail to PMB 34, P.O. Box 10001, Saipan MP 96950. Submissions to TAGA *Sports* must include the writer's name, village address (no P.O. boxes), and daytime phone or mobile number. Letters may be edited for length and clarity and may be published or used in any medium. All submissions become the property of the publication and will not be returned.

What's hot in golf: the new GolfLogix

STEVE DIMEGLIO
USA Today

GolfLogix is basically a road map to improving your game and enjoyment on the golf course.

WWW.GOLFLOGIX.COM

Hole No. 1 on the East Course of the LaoLao Bay Golf Resort, as shown on GolfLogix's courses mapped feature.

WWW.GOLFLOGIX.COM

Hole No. 7 at the Marianas Country Club golf range, as shown in this image from GolfLogix's courses mapped feature.

GolfLogix, a top golf app that has been a boon for more than 1.75 million members worldwide, is basically a road map to improving your game and enjoyment on the golf course.

For starters, GolfLogix—which was the first to introduce handheld GPS to the game and holds a U.S. patent for GPS and Internet-based club tracking application—has been professionally mapping courses for more than 12 years and owns the largest, most up-to-date golf course database in the world. That equates to detailed maps of every hole of more than 30,000 golf courses worldwide—basically giving golfers a caddie, with aerial flyovers of every hole.

The software tracks scores and stats of every round, which then can be uploaded to an online clubhouse community where golfers can interact and compete with millions of other players worldwide.

Now the app has extended its road map.

GolfLogix and Golf Digest have hooked up to create Golf Digest Live—combining the precision of the GolfLogix GPS distance and club-tracking technology with content from the magazine.

That includes golf tips, articles and videos—and a post-round assessment of your game complete with suggestions to improve. Available exclusively through the GolfLogix app, Golf Digest Live ($19.99 annually with a free 30-day trial) uses data from the software to determine a player's statistics, strengths and weaknesses. Algorithms then generate multiple post-round recaps, including a statistical breakdown with suggested drills and articles from the magazine's stable of instructors and PGA Tour playing editors.

Golf Digest Live is available in the GolfLogix iPhone App and the online member clubhouse at http://www.golflogix.com/. It is also available for all Android OS Smartphones.

Every member has an individual profile within the GolfLogix Clubhouse. Users get access to video instruction and rules information, golf jokes, quotes, as well as Golf Digest articles and nutrition tips. And there is the capability to make your own magazine.

HOW DOES GOLFLOGIX MAP COURSES?

GolfLogix takes pride in having the largest and most up-to-date golf course database in the world. According to its website (https://golflogix.com), GolfLogix uses proprietary tools to build its robust database of golf courses worldwide. "Our golf course database is the most sought after in the industry. The imagery and proprietary software that our professional mapping team uses allows us to zoom in on any golf course hazard or hole anywhere in the world...in a matter of days. But we don't stop there. We update and review our golf course maps on a regular basis to make sure our members have the most up-to-date information available. So go ahead, pick a course, any course and we probably have it!"

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An image of Hole No. 2 at the Kingfisher Golf Links, using the course mapped feature of GolfLogix.

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Johann Noetzel

ROSELYN B. MONROYO
TAGA *Sports* Staff Writer

Johann Noetzel earned the nickname "The Berlin Wall" because of his German roots and his ability to block an opposing team's attempt to score a goal. Yet this former Aston Villa and FC Dallas player claims that it was only by accident that he became a goalkeeper.

Noetzel, a former pro football goalkeeper who played in the English Premier League and Major League Soccer, is the Northern Mariana Islands Football Association's technical director as well as the starting goalkeeper for the CNMI Men's National Team, the "Blue Ayuyu."

Q: When you began playing soccer in grade school, did you start out as a goalie?

I started out as a forward. I loved scoring on keepers, and still do. Like most goalies, my first time in goal came by accident when the regular goalie didn't show up for the game. I volunteered and never left.

Q: What's the first thing you do once you're in the goalie area?

I bless my goalposts and crossbar and visualize my goal box as the sacred Holy Land. *All must be saved!*

Q: What do you eat before and after a game?

I eat light, some carbs the night before and mainly protein and bananas the day of the game. On Sundays, M-League game-days, I usually get a good breakfast at Café at the Park across from AMP.

Q: When was your most unforgettable game?

That was in 2000 in England for Aston Villa against Stoke City. Wearing an English Premier League kit and playing with international stars, I kept a shutout in front of the manager, John Gregory, and played very well.

Q: How about the most special award you earned?

In my senior year in college I was named the Pacific West Coast Conference Player of the Year and was voted an NSCAA Adidas All-American. It was an honor that was a goal of mine since childhood and which helped me get drafted to the pros.

Q: You played in Europe and MLS and met a lot of big name players. Did you ever get starstruck?

My first day at Aston Villa I played a game of "keeper wars" against David James, who

FAST FACTS

FULL NAME: Johann Thomas Noetzel
HEIGHT: 6'0"
BIRTHDAY: April 4, 1977
CITIZENSHIP: Germany/USA
FAVORITE PLAYER: German Bundesliga goalkeeper Rene Adler
FAVORITE TEAMS: Aston Villa and FC Dallas

ROSELYN B. MONROYO

was at that time England's No. 1 goalie. That was a bit intimidating, as he was not only the best GK in England but he was about 6'6" and like a monster in the goal with hands like a Panda! I also got to meet one of my idols growing up, European Footballer of the Year, World Cup champion, and captain for Germany Lothar Mathaeus. He played for New York when I was playing for Dallas. We met on the pitch before our playoff game at the Meadowlands in New York/New Jersey.

Q: How about the strangest thing that ever happened to you while defending your team's goal?

In my debut game in MLS for Dallas against San Jose, an attacker played through my defense with a pass and was going one-on-one against me. I heard a whistle right at the time of the pass and thought the referee called offside, so I relaxed and was going to let him run out the play—attackers usually shoot the ball even if they are called for an offside. At the last second, I decided to make the save anyway and not let him score even if the play was dead. Well, I did save it off the post and caught the rebound! Good thing, because when I turned around with the ball, it was actually a fan in the stands who blew the whistle and the play was always live. If I hadn't saved it, it would've been a goal! Imagine if I would've just continued to stand there and watch the play run out. Whew, close one!

Q: What jersey number do you prefer?

My pro number in Dallas was 21, which I like, but I prefer the old school No. 1 jersey. Who can argue when you're No. 1, especially the other goalies trying to take your job?

Q: What are the three important things a goalie must always remember during the game?

1. Stay focused and always be ready every second of every minute in the game.
2. Have fun, don't guess or cheat. Make a player beat you. Don't beat yourself.
3. You must be a perfectionist with only victory in mind; one mistake could cost your team the game.

Q: Your favorite field?

I played at some awesome venues like the Meadowlands in New York/New Jersey and Soldier Field in Chicago, RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C., the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, but my favorite would have to be the Cotton Bowl Stadium in Dallas, our home field before Pizza Hut Park was built. I have so many good memories from my rookie season in Dallas there.

Q: Is there any team you'd love to face again?

Actually, of all the teams I ever lost to, I would love to get another crack at the New York Red Bulls as they knocked us out of the playoffs in my rookie season in MLS.

But right now I'm focused on my first international match for the Men's National Team, which will come at the AFC Challenge Cup Qualifying Rounds in early March. The venue will be somewhere in Asia. We have a chance to make history; I'm excited for our team, the FA, and the NMI. It's our first invitation by the Asian Football Confederation to participate in an AFC tournament. Twenty nations will be competing for the right to move on to the next round on the road to the championship. This is a major step toward my goal of putting Saipan on the international football map as a serious competitor in Asia, not only with the "Blue Ayuyu" but also with the Women's National Team, the youth National Teams, and the beach soccer national teams.

Q: Have you tried other sports?

I played all sports growing up. In high school, it was mainly soccer and American football. I was a wide receiver, corner back, kicker, and punt returner. I was used to soccer, so I didn't ever want to come out of the game so I made sure I was on offense, defense, and special teams. These days I enjoy golfing, tennis, and beach volleyball. But one of my other true loves is surfing. I love being in the water and connecting with Mother Nature. Stand Up Paddle-boarding; a close 3rd!

Q: If you're not a soccer player or goalie coach, what would you be?

I would be a pro surfer. I love the water, beach, sun, nature, and the challenge of riding waves. It's a bit like playing GK, it's only you against the elements, some of which you can control, and most of which you can't.

MARK RABAGO
TAGA *Sports* Associate Editor

Masterstroke

Six years as captain of the Pacific Oceania Davis Cup team.

Micronesian Games gold medalist.

Nearly 100 tournaments won.

Jeff Race is now synonymous to tennis and winning, not only in the CNMI but throughout the region.

However, what the lanky 6'3" Race finds most fulfilling in his almost four-decade-old tennis career is mentoring his protégées that go on to become world-class tennis players.

Topping the list of tennis phenoms the now 51-year-old Race molded are Ji Hoon Heo and Kana Aikawa.

Heo recently barged into the NCAA Division I scene after transferring from Hawaii Pacific University to Morehead State University in Kentucky.

A couple of years ago, Heo dominated local and regional tennis so much that Pacific Oceania made an exemption by allowing him to suit up for its ITF Junior Touring Team.

Aikawa, meanwhile, parlayed a very successful local and regional tennis career into a scholarship at the University of Hawaii-Hilo, where she played tennis for the Rainbow Wahines.

"Lots of my early students are well into their 30s with families and careers. Quite a few played in college at some level. Ji Hoon Heo and Kana Aikawa are the two who have gone the farthest in tennis, both with full scholarships. Right now I believe we have nearly a dozen players who could be potential scholarship recipients in the future," he said.

Race himself played college tennis at Chapman University and loves the sport so much he volunteered at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics as a ball boy in the tennis competition.

Transitioning tennis from a hobby to a full-time job, however, didn't come overnight and he had to move to the middle of the Pacific to find his destiny.

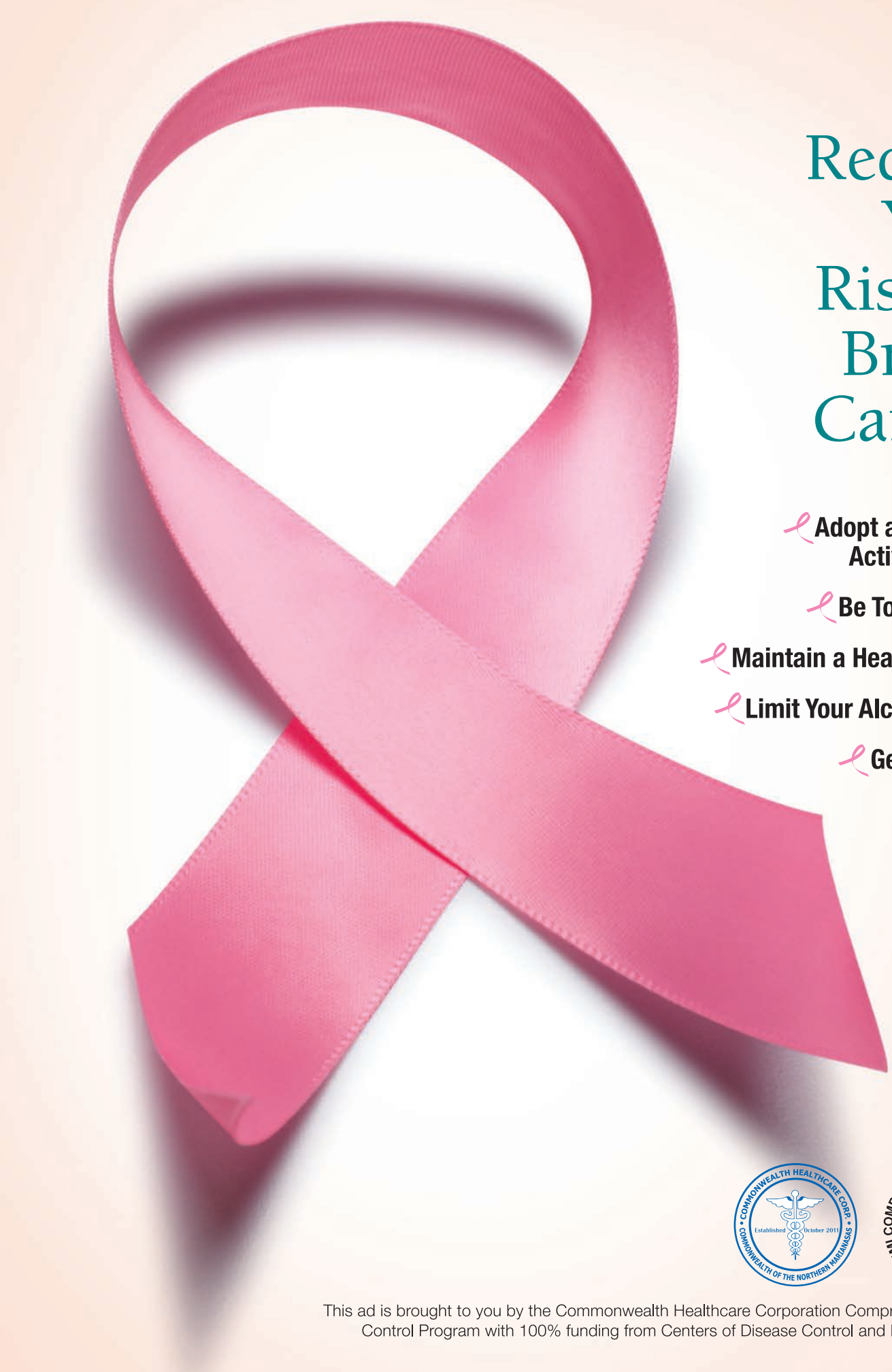
He discovered Saipan when he and his wife took a vacation here in 1986 and "fell in love with the place on my first weekend visit and my wife and I moved here the next year."

The first time Race got into any sort of coaching was during the 1989 South Pacific Games in Tonga. At that time, he was already making a name

➜

{ Coach Jeff Race and his Aces Tennis Academy students demonstrate the North Pacific Team wave they did during the 2012 Pacific Oceania Junior Championships in Fiji. }

ROSELYN B. MONROYO



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ROSELYN B. MONROYO

Coach Jeff Race and his Aces Tennis Academy students perform forehand drills at the Pacific Islands Club tennis court in San Antonio.

for himself, winning tournaments left and right on Saipan and in Guam.

He got his coaching feet wet in 1991 when he organized his first-ever youth tennis camp. "I started it in 1991, after leaving an executive position at Pacific Islands Club. Tom Weindl, the principal at Whispering Palms School, asked me to do a three-week tennis program there. When it was over several parents asked me to continue with the lessons. I was hesitant because I expected to get a new job soon. I agreed to give them lessons until I found a new job, but I found that many people were asking me for lessons and that I loved doing it."

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Jeff Race waits for his opponent's shot from the baseline during a local tournament in the early '90s.

Teaching tennis opened a lot of avenues for Race, setting off in 2001 what would later become a six-year stint as captain of the Pacific Oceania Davis Cup team.

"My greatest experience as a coach has been to captain the Pacific Oceania Davis Cup Team for six years. Being a Davis Cup captain is a dream come true for any coach, and presented the most challenges and opportunity for growth," he said.

A unique opportunity also presented itself to Race during the 2006 Micronesian Games on Saipan. During the Games, he not only coached the CNMI team into bagging the most medals in the sport but, also got to play with one of his students, Aikawa, during the quadrennial event.

"Definitely the whole 2006 Micro Games was at the top. It had been my goal to win a gold medal in the Micro Games in 1994 and 1998, but I ended up with a bunch of silvers. Winning team gold, as well as men's and mixed doubles, with Todd [Montgomery] and Kana, was sweet," he said.

Also up there in his playing career milestone, which lists more than 80 career championships, was when Race won the Fiji Open in 1993. "I got my name on a perpetual trophy with some big names, including John Newcombe."

More recently the success of Commonwealth junior players in the region has been Race's most important goal and knowing that the CNMI has become a junior tennis power in the Pacific—second only to New Caledonia—brings a smile to his face.

"The state of junior tennis in the CNMI is very good, but not yet great. We have around 12 junior players who could get university scholarships in the future, but in order to do so they need to have an [International Tennis Federation] junior world ranking," he said.

That means traveling to tournaments in relatively close countries like South Korea, Japan, Fiji, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand to make it happen and going to these countries takes money and the players shouldn't expect success for their first 10 or so events.

Race laments that the Northern Mariana Islands Tennis Association gets zero government dollars and private sponsorships are getting so much tougher to come by that sending youth tennis players abroad has become a challenge.

"The best thing we can do is to try to have one of these events on Saipan so that it is easier and cheaper for our players to get their first ITF points. With that you've got a foot in the door and it's a little easier to move up to the level where colleges will consider you for a scholarship. We are in the process of putting together an application for an event here in 2013," said Race.

With that burning passion to have his wards succeed, Race is not only a certified champion coach but also a champion in the hearts of his players.

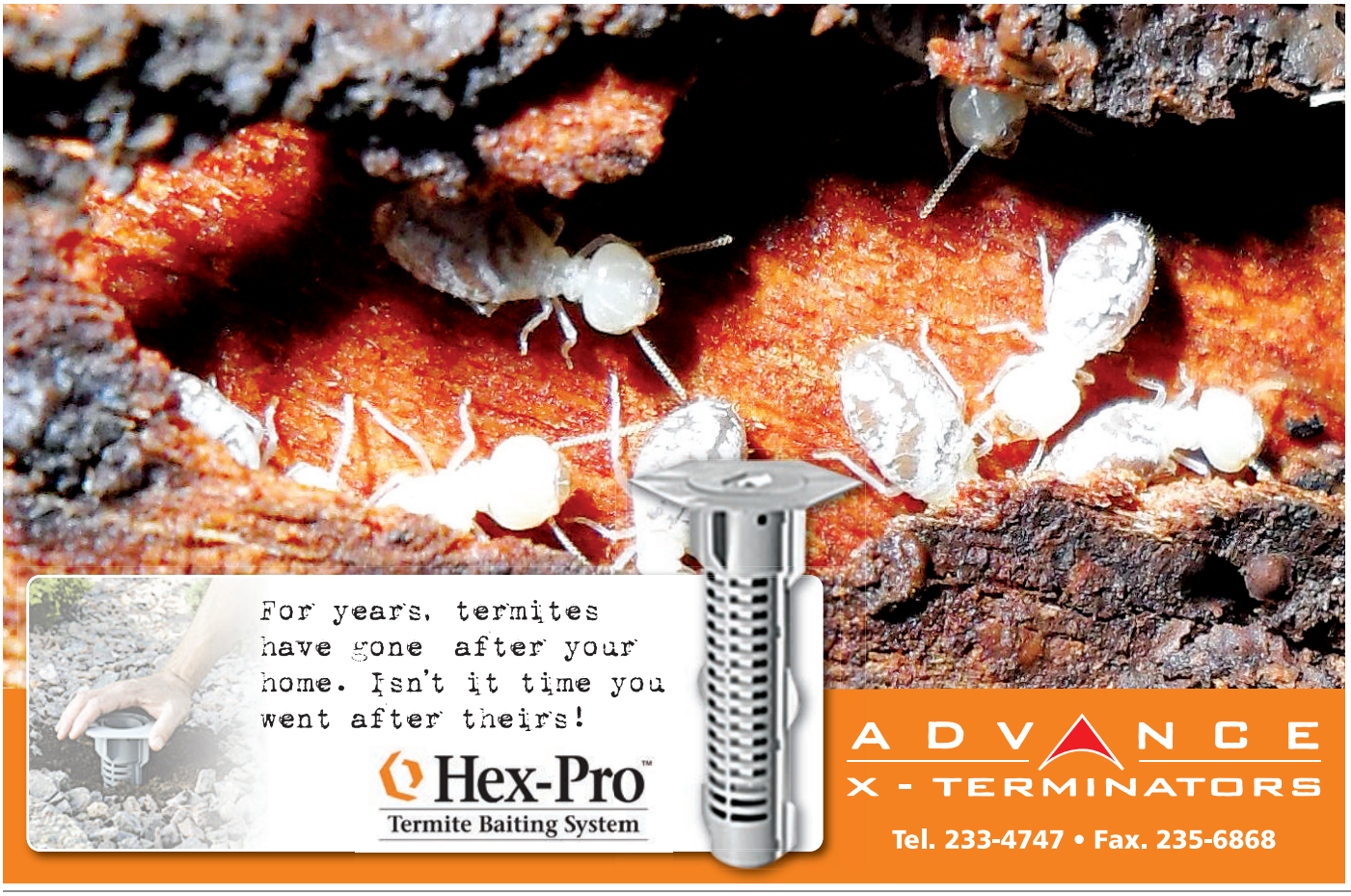
"Seeing my students achieve success at all levels and learning lessons from the sport that will help them throughout their lives [is the most fulfilling part of teaching tennis]," he said.

A mouse, a shark, and a cockroach

MARK RABAGO
TAGA *Sports* Associate Editor

I grew up in the '80s rooting for the Los Angeles Lakers. That meant idolizing the likes of Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Earvin Johnson, and James Worthy—all in their short shorts and white sneakers glory.

More often that not, legendary Lakers play-by-play announcer Chick Hearn called these Purple and Gold legends not by their given names but by their nicknames, like "Cap" for the former Lewis Ferdinand Alcindor (Abdul Jabbar), "Magic" for the 6'9" triple-double machine Johnson, and "Big Game James" for the 1982 NBA first-round overall draft pick Worthy.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Coming here in the CNMI in 2001 and covering sports soon after, athletes with nicknames were hard to come by. So I did what any other enterprising and resourceful sports reporter would do—create some! Among the names I made up to spice up my reporting were "Mr. Unorthodox," "Mighty Mouse," "Human Pogo Stick," and "Man Mountain."

"Mr. Unorthodox" of course is none other than Jess Wabol, a former principal of Oleai Elementary School who an unparalleled sage with the golf club.

From his humble beginnings learning the sport using a guyabano tree branch as a club, Wabol went on to win every conceivable golf championship on island and has represented the CNMI in countless regional tournaments.

He came to be called "Mr. Unorthodox" because of his unusual cross-hand grip on the golf club, which despite its lack of aesthetics has proven terribly consistent throughout the years.

I dubbed Mike Olaitiman the "Mighty Mouse" during my first few years covering the 18-and-under Saipan Rotary Club Basketball League. Despite his diminutive size, Olaitiman was a blur with the basketball but what made him stand out was the way he drives to the hoop with the chutzpah reminiscent of Mighty Mouse.

Ronald Delos Reyes got the moniker "Man Mountain" because of his heft. Hovering close to 6' and around 220 lbs with biceps that could rival a bodybuilder, Delos Reyes played for such teams as Jollibee, Pampanga Dragons, and Cabalen.

Delos Reyes, who worked for an affiliate of *Saipan Tribune*, once asked me to drop the "Man Mountain" reference whenever I write about his basketball exploits. Many of his friends and co-workers thought he was given the nickname because he was some sort of simpleton from the mountains or what we call in the Philippines "*taga bundok*"—equivalent to the term hillbilly.

Another not-so-well-received nickname was the "Human Pogo Stick" that I christened high-flying Leo Itaas. Before slowing down the past couple of years, Itaas was among the leading scorers of the UFO Inter-Organizational Basketball League. He made his baskets exclusively from inside the paint as his superior leaping ability allowed him to soar above his opponents for the easy deuce.

I gave him the nickname because of his seemingly endless source of bounce. He, however, didn't appreciate that at first and asked if I called him that because I thought he looked like a quail, which is called "pugo" in the Philippines.

Flashy nicknames

There were already a bunch of sportsmen sporting flashy nicknames even before I landed on Saipan—I just didn't have the contacts then to know about Robert "Jumpman" Quitugua and Richard "Doc" Brostrom.

Jumpman starred for the CNMI national team coached by Sonny Flores in the 1998 Guam Micronesian Games. He played alongside the likes of Edsel Mendoza and Ray Lizama and helped the Commonwealth to a silver medal after falling to the hosts in the finals.

He was known as Jumpman because, you guessed it, he can jump right out of the Gilbert C. Ada Gymnasium.

I finally met Mr. Quitugua while working out at the old Saipan Fitness Gym sometime in 2002. Still a physical specimen as he was in his heyday, he said he was forced to hang up his high-tops after a series of knee injuries.

Brostrom, meanwhile, is none other than the longtime medical director of the Department of Public Health.

In college, the 6'4" forward played NCAA II basketball and on Saipan was part of the multi-titled Verizon teams in the Masters Basketball League at the start of the millennium.

For obvious reasons he was nicknamed "Doc" because he's a physician but we can also make the case that the nickname stuck because of the do-it-all Brostrom's skills in the hardwood, which approached a Ph.D. level in basketball.

Other athletes I covered throughout the years that had interesting nicknames were Joe "Kamikaze" Camacho, Jerry "Mutombo" Lopez, Roger "The Ghost" Espiritu, Mark "The Shark" Halstead, Ketson "Roadrunner Bunny" Kabiriel, and Rezne "Aquaman" Wong.

Camacho got the "Kamikaze" nickname during his drag racing days in Marpi where he used to drive with wild abandon. He, however, nicely asked that I drop the "Kamikaze" nickname when writing stories about him when he qualified for the 2005 Johnny Walker Classic Pro-Am Event in China.

Camacho said his "Kamikaze" nickname probably wouldn't sit well with his Chinese hosts

1 Joe "Kamikaze" Camacho 2 Roger "The Ghost" Espiritu 3 Jess "Mr. Unorthodox" Wabol 4 Mike "The Mighty Mouse' Olaitiman 5 Richard "Doc" Brostrom

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CNMI DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH - IMMUNIZATION PROGRAM

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because even after six decades since the end of World War II, Imperial Japan's atrocities in China still touch raw nerves.

The 6'2" Lopez, meanwhile, acquired the "Mutombo" nickname because of his height, which although doesn't approximate Dikembe Mutombo's 7'2" frame, was still stratospheric by local standards. And like his idol, Lopez was also known to finger-wag whenever he blocks an opponent's attempt.

Espiritu, one of the CNMI's top pool players, was obviously named "The Ghost" because his surname is Spanish for spirit. An artist with the cue stick, it can also be argued that Roger got the nickname because of how he usually spooks the competition en route to winning many billiards championships.

Halstead dominated the local bowling scene before moving to Hawaii with his family a couple of years ago.

"The Shark" appeared to be a perfect nickname for the kegler since he worked as a boat captain in the morning before preying on hapless bowlers most weeknights at the Saipan Bowling Center and Capitol Bowling Center.

Kabiriel probably was fond of Looney Tunes in his youth because following another dominant run in one of the local races a few years back, he approached me and asked that from now on he should be called the "Roadrunner Bunny"

Given that the Energizer Bunny commercial was the fad at the time, I still did a double-take since the Roadrunner and Bugs Bunny are two separate and different characters in the Warner Bros. cartoons universe.

Another two-dimension character adopted by a local athlete is Aquaman, which University of Hawaii-Manoa varsity swimmer Rezne Wong uses as part of his email address.

He may not want to be known as Aquaman publicly but based on the achievements and accolades the Marianas High School alumnus has bestowed on his home islands, Wong can very well call himself Superman and Captain America combined.

Martial arts

The ratio of athletes to nicknames in the above-mentioned sports, however, pales in comparison to nicknames thrown left and right in the local mixed martial scene.

But through the years, the nicknames "The Crank," "Big Hit," and "Flying Cockroach" have captured the public's imagination.

This time I recruited Trench Tech Promotions, Inc. owner Justis "Cuki" Alvarez to shed light on the origins of these classic MMA monikers.

He said Frank "The Crank" Camacho, who was featured in the latest Ultimate Fighting Champion match, was always an aggressive fighter.

Alvarez said that when Camacho first joined Trench Tech in 2005, he was only 15 years old and the cadre of fighters and trainers instantly noticed his hardcore aggressive style as he would always "crank" up the intensity in training and the name stuck.

As for Kelvin "The Big Hit" Fitial, Alvarez said the reigning Universal Reality Combat Championship heavyweight title-holder always had a huge aura about him and that's why he was initially known as "The Franchise."

However, since "The Franchise" was already taken by former Houston Rockets star Steve Francis, Fitial took the name "The Big Fit" because of how he always gave his opponents fits and that "fit" is actually short for Fitial.

A few fights later, Alvarez suggested that he change his moniker again to "The Big Hit" because it sounded better and since he always "hits big" and his MMA career has been a big hit ever since.

Alvarez sheepishly said that he got to be known as the "Flying Cockroach" following a hard day of training when his boys decided to give the one who gave them fight names a moniker of his own.

"Nothing really rhymed with 'Cuki' so we started to throw some names out. "Cuk from Chuuk' Alvarez, Cuki 'The MMA Rookie,' Cuk 'The Duk Duk'... all lame names! In my motocross and jetski days, it was Cuki 'The Monster' Alvarez. But in reality, I'm terrified of cockroaches—they totally creep me out—and the team knew this, so Frank 'The Crank' decided to play a prank on me and placed a cockroach in an envelope and handed it to me saying 'the boys voted on a name'... when I opened the envelope, the cockroach scared the heck out of me and I 'flew' off my chair! That was when 'The Flying Cockroach' was born."

Since his retirement, however, Alvarez has ditched "The Flying Cockroach" nickname and now goes by the moniker "The Janitor" because, in his own words, "I basically fix things up and I keep the image of MMA decent and clean."

1 Kelvin "The Big Hit" Fitial 2 Cuki "The Flying Cockroach" Alvarez 3 Mark "The Shark" Halstead 4 Leo "Human Pogo Stick" Itaas
5 Rezne "Aquaman" Wong 6 Jack "Roadrunner Bunny" Kabiriel

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- Turn off water heater when away from home.
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- Set air-con thermostat to 78°F.
- Install solar screens / films on sunny side of windows to reduce heat in your home.
- Keep air-con filters clean
- Close shades/drapes on sunny side of house during day to keep light and heat out.
- Don't block air vents, curtains, shades or furniture.
- Keep cool air in your home circulating with ceiling, oscillating or box fans.
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- Fix leaky faucets.
- Quick showers instead of baths.
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- Use pressure cookers to save time and energy
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CANOEING
A crash course

With the 14th Annual Micronesian Cup being hosted right here on Saipan later this month, I thought it would be fun to get in the ocean and put my paddling skills to the test.

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

In this page and next page, members of the Hoe Lokahi Canoe Club make practice runs at the beach near the Susupe Beach Park. There are a number of other different groups that hold similar paddling sessions such as the Saipan Outrigger Canoe Club, Marianas Pacific Paddlers, Mas Fatuul, and the Saipan Paddlers Club.

I was fortunate enough to tag along with the Hoe Lokahi Canoe Club to participate in one of their routine training sessions at Susupe Beach Park back in September, and it did not take long to see first-hand just how physically, and mentally, demanding competitive outrigger paddling can be.

Though the work schedule of a sports reporter can be erratic (for the most part I work in the evenings) I quickly found myself out of my element from the start as my guest-workout arrangement was scheduled bright and early at 7am on a Saturday morning. I was game for the new experience, however, and received a warm greeting from Hoe Lokahi's Ed Johnson and my friend James Lee at the rendezvous spot.

I have done some recreational canoeing way back when I was a boy scout, which included a pair of 50-mile camping trips. However, canoe racing is a whole new ballgame. For starters, the outrigger boats are much bigger and heavier than what I was accustomed to and battling the ocean is much more difficult than cruising down a river.

Then there is the preparatory stretching and some warm-up exercises before setting out to sea. We carried a couple of 45-foot outrigger canoes to the shoreline where we took turns performing simulated paddling

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND

drills in the beached vessels, while Johnson and other veteran members critiqued our stroke technique.

I received a lot of helpful pointers right away such as how to properly hold the paddle and how to adjust my feet when paddling on different sides of the boat. I was also advised to reach forward with the paddle as far as I could, and then use my core muscles to pull through each stroke, all the while making sure that the paddle is fully submerged in the water and that I don't disrupt the rhythm of the other members.

The coaches could tell right way that I was using my arms too much and suggested that I brace my arms and put my whole body into the stroke, with systematic "twisting" pelvic thrusts.

I tried my best to make use of their expertise but successfully carrying out their instructions was easier said than done. I simply could not keep pace with the gung-ho outrigger warriors, despite being seated in the back of the boat, which is supposed to be the best place for a weak link.

So let's just say my conditioning was not up to par heading into what turned out to be a hefty tribulation, and I almost lost my breakfast after roughly an hour in the water.

One of the things I found most difficult was transferring the paddle during the side changes. When paddling, one member near the front of the boat kept count of the strokes and would call out "Hut" on every 15th stroke, after which the others cried "Ho" on the next stroke before everyone switched sides simultaneously. Well, almost simultaneously because I had a tough time getting the paddle to my other hand and in the water, in sync with the team.

Adding insult to injury, coach Johnson was steering from the back of the craft, and wheeled us in circles while we all dug into the water during our first warm-up stint in the ocean. I pulled and pulled with all my might, but it was to little avail as we seemed to be barely crawling forward at a worm's pace.

Then to my surprise, we headed in after a few more turns back and forth because holding on to the brakes was not difficult enough for us, according to coach Johnson, so he hung an old tire on the nose of our boat to create even more resistance during the second leg, which left me spent.

I hung tough for most of the spell, but almost gave up just before he called off the dogs. Near the end, I was so thirsty and out of breath I didn't notice that I was no longer keeping my head up, which caused me to fall out of rhythm with the other rowers, but Johnson encouraged me to keep going and fight through it.

I managed to survive the first two runs, but am not sure I would have survived a long distance trek, which the group did after another brief break. Since there was an extra female team member present at their practice, let's pretend I took one for the team and offered her my seat.

> Hoe Lokahi is a Hawaiian term that translates to "paddle in harmony," which is really the key to running a successful race. When the paddlers are all in sync, you can almost feel the boat being lifted closer to the surface of the water.

Being so out of shape led to the concern of over exhausting myself, and though I made it back in one piece, my aches and pains taught me that outrigger canoeing is a total body workout as it builds up your arms, shoulders, back, chest, and stomach (core) muscles. It also takes lot of mental toughness, which is needed to will oneself through the fatigue.

All in all it was a new fun experience, canoeing, and is also a good channel to make friends as the local paddlers are a subculture in themselves, similar to the soccer community.

In addition to the Hoe Lokahi club, there are a number of other different groups that hold similar paddling sessions such as the Saipan Outrigger Canoe Club, Marianas Pacific Paddlers, Mas Fatuul, and the Saipan Paddlers Club. If you want to get involved with canoeing, just visit any of the group's Facebook pages, except for Mas Fatuul, and get in touch with the crowd. TS

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND

ROSELYN B. MONROYO

A golfer follows through his chip on the greens in one of the holes at Coral Ocean Point.

Saipan golf précis

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND
TAGA *Sports* Staff Writer

Earlier this year I was fortunate enough to find the time to sneak out to the links at Coral Ocean Point Golf Resort and must admit that even though my score was nothing to boast about, it was the most fun round of golf I ever played in my life.

Back in Indiana, I learned the game of golf from my father, an avid golfer, in the Midwest plains where a round of golf on any of a handful of run-of-the-mill public courses in the city would run us each about $40.

Thus the idea of getting to play a round on any of Saipan's championship rated courses for roughly the same price literally blew my mind, so I took a tour of the other courses on island to compare their terrain and overall layout.

The courses may be difficult for beginners, but you have to start somewhere, and realize that courses that are this well-kept in the U.S. mainland could easily attract players at well over $100 per round, so take advantage, but remember to bring plenty of extra balls!

CORAL OCEAN POINT

7,015 yards/Par 72

Coral Ocean Point is built along the rocky cliffs on the southern part of Saipan and offers a little bit of everything such as elevated tee boxes, lake holes, and ultra-fine grained sand traps.

Its wide open fairways make it tolerable for beginner level golfers but its length, among other variables, serves as an equalizer to keep it challenging for all skill levels.

The holes along the cliff flaunt breathtaking views but they are also the most difficult to play because of the strong winds that swirl inland from the ocean.

COP's signature hole (No. 14) is a tricky Par 3 that starts on top of a cliff and descends steeply down to a postage stamp green; the drastic change in elevation coupled with the constant inland airstream makes for a dramatic experience even for returning players.

The course is designed by American-pro Larry Nelson, an elite golfer in the '80s who notched 40 career wins.

IF YOU GO...

LOCAL RATE: $30
CLUB RENTAL: $25 (Mizuno)/$35 VIQ or XX-10 2012 models
RESTAURANT: Available at the club house
PRO SHOP: Offers Nike Golf equipment
HOURS: 6am to 6pm
CONTACT: (670) 234-7000

DESIGNER'S BACKGROUND

Larry Nelson won 10 PGA tour events, three of which were major titles. Nelson won the PGA Championship in 1981, the US Open (Oakmont) in 1983, and a second PGA Championship plum in 1987.

Upon turning 50 in 1997, Nelson triumphed on the Champions Tour 19 times; he also won four Japan Golf Tour events.

The three-time Ryder Cup team member was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2006.

KINGFISHER GOLF LINKS

7,000 yards/Par 72

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND

Tucked away in the Talofofo jungle on the eastern coast of Saipan, Kingfisher Golf Links is fittingly described as an oceanfront course because of an array of stunning ocean views that complement all 18 holes.

Those not in the know may have qualms about what awaits them at the end of the narrow, winding road down to Talofofo but they won't be disappointed when they get to the gate.

Australian-pro Graham Marsh designed the course with the intention of accentuating the natural beauty of the cliff lines, but beware. Although it is strikingly beautiful, there are a number of crafty challenges such as limited fairway space, ocean jumps, and some hectic dog legs to avoid.

Holes 14, 15, and 16 all run along the face of a cliff and leave zero margin for error from the tee box. If you aren't nervous enough just squaring up to land a safe shot, the cart ride alone over the stone bridges is sure to get your blood pumping in between swings.

Furthermore, the course also plays just as long as the others and serves as a hefty challenge even for experienced players.

IF YOU GO...

LOCAL RATE: $30
CLUB RENTAL: $25
3 practice holes available
CAFETERIA: Ica Taco, which serves affordably priced Japanese and American a la carte items
PRO SHOP: Offers Nike Golf equipment
HOURS: 6:30am to 7pm
CONTACT: (670) 322-1100

DESIGNER'S BACKGROUND

Graham Marsh has designed a number of courses including The Vines Resort, Palm Meadows Resort, and Terry Hill Golf & Country Club, among a long list of others.

The current Champions Tour competitor was a mainstay on the Euro Tour, Japan Tour and PGA Tour of Australasia in the '70s and '80s. He accrued 70 professional wins in total, including one PGA victory; six Champions Tours, two of which were majors (1997 US Senior Open/1999 Tradition); 10 European Tours, 15 Tour of Australasia wins; 20 Japan Golf Tour triumphs; and a pair of Japan Senior Open titles.

LAO LAO BAY GOLF RESORT

East Course: 6,330 yards/Par 72
West Course: 6,805 yards/Par 72

Saipan's newest gem opened just over 15 years ago and is the only golf establishment on island that offers two 18-hole courses.

Set atop the Kagman Peninsula, the courses were designed by world-famous Australian pro Greg Norman aka "The Shark," who was the No. 1 golfer in the world for 331 weeks back in the '80s and '90s.

Lao Lao Bay's East route is primarily an oceanfront course that puts players' skills to the test against the constant coastal winds, while the West Course blends into the jungle with a more classical setting as both courses diversely exhibit dazzling views of the island scenery.

The East Course's signature hole (No. 6) is set up right on the edge of a cliff where you tee off inland to an elevated green atop a neighboring cliff about 130 yards away.

The West Course plays a little longer and features a number of deceptive water hazards.

Take advantage of this month's local rate special, which offers both its East and West courses for only $25 per round.

MARIANAS COUNTRY CLUB

6,449 yards/Par 72

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND

The Marianas Country Club is an 18-hole course set up in the limestone hills on the northwest side of Saipan, in Marpi. Golfers of all skill levels can enjoy its broad rolling fairways and get a stunning view over the lagoon. Its hilly terrain may pose a problem to some, but the abundance of manicured grass throughout the course almost guarantees at least a chance for recovery.

The range is known for a number of long Par 4's that pretty much give everyone trouble.

IF YOU GO...

LOCAL RATE: $30
CLUB RENTAL: $40
DRIVING RANGE: Located at Mariana Resort for $5 per bucket of balls
RESTAURANT: Available at Mariana Resort
PRO SHOP: Offers Nike Golf equipment
HOURS: 6am to 6pm
CONTACT: (670) 322-2211

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND

IF YOU GO...

LOCAL RATE: Weekly $40 (east)/$35 (west); Weekends cost an additional $5
CLUB RENTAL: $30 (Mizuno)/ $40 (Nike Golf)
DRIVING RANGE: $3 per bucket of balls
RESTAURANT: Eagle Ray Restaurant
PRO SHOP: Nike Golf, Calloway
HOURS: 7am to 7pm
CONTACT: (670) 236-8888

DESIGNER'S BACKGROUND

Greg Norman was the No. 1 ranked golfer in the world back in the '80s and '90s. He also finished as the PGA's leading money winner in 1986, 1990 and 1995.

Norman boasts 88 wins altogether, including 20 on the PGA Tour, two of which were major Open Championship titles (1986 and 1993); 31 Tour of Australasia wins; 14 European Tour wins; and a pair of Japan Tour triumphs.

Norman was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2001 and has won numerous awards such as PGA Player of the Year in 1995 and the Byron Nelson Award (5), among almost 20 others.

SAIPAN COUNTRY CLUB

2,766 yards/Par 34

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND

Built in 1962, the Saipan Country Club is the oldest golf course on Saipan. It is a well kept 9-hole executive course located off Middle Road in Chalan Kiya.

The forgiving Par 3 course is perfect for new players who want to learn the basics of the game before taking one of the larger championship-rated challenges.

It has a lot of wide open fairways mixed with some tough-to-reach greens hiding between trees and a number of strategically placed bunkers.

There are two lengthy par 5's, but most of the par 4's are reachable in two shots, giving even new players a chance for at least a couple par opportunities.

The Saipan Country Club offers carts, but can be played out on foot with or without a pull cart.

IF YOU GO...

LOCAL RATE: $25 (18 holes)
CLUB RENTAL: $15 half set, $25 full set
SNACK BAR: Offers moderately priced homemade Udon noodles, hotdogs, and breakfast specials
HOURS: 7am to 7pm
CONTACT: (670) 234-7300

Students compete in the qualifying race for the 5,000m run during the 2008 All Schools Championships at the Oleai Sports Complex.

ROSELYN B. MONROYO

NMA

ROSELYN B. MONROYO
TAGA *Sports* Staff Writer

Right on track

In 1990, when Saipan hosted the 2nd Micronesian Games, CNMI athletes who competed in the 400-meter run failed to complete even 150 meters of the race. Twenty years later, the CNMI dominated the running events in the 2010 Micronesian Games in Palau. That in a nutshell shows how far CNMI athletics has gone since a track and field group was formed 22 years ago.

The Northern Mariana Islands Track and Field Association was created in 1990 after the CNMI won only one gold and a couple of bronze and silver medals in the 2nd Micro Games. Kurt Barnes was its first president and was joined on the board by vice president Louie Wabol, secretary Kim Prinz, and treasurer John Hoffman.

"During the 2nd Micro Games held here, there were athletes representing CNMI who competed in the 400-meter race and couldn't finish 150 meters of the race. Some of the silvers and bronzes were won because only two or three athletes entered in an event. The women's shot put was won with a distance of 7 meters (Palau) and the CNMI took the silver with a throw of 6 meters and there were only two in the event," Barnes said.

"Needless to say, a transformation was needed to change the mindset of track and field. Thus the NMITFF was born, and in the next Micro Games, held [in] Guam in 1994, the CNMI won over 30 medals, a tremendous accomplishment for the track federation."

The CNMI went on to become a perennial medal contender in athletics in the 1998 (Palau), 2002 (Pohnpei), and the 2006 Micro Games (Saipan) before totally smoking its competitors two years ago in Palau after winning 25 medals (10 gold, 7 silver, and 8 bronze).

The Commonwealth won the women's 100-meter, 200-meter, 400-meter, 5,000-meter, 10,000-meter and the 4x100-meter and 4x400-meter relay races in Palau and also claimed a couple of medals in the men's and women's throwing and field events.

Secret to success

Besides the Micro Games, the Northern Marianas Athletics (the new name of NMITFF) also sends athletes to the Oceania Regional Championships, World Championships, World Youth Championships, and other invitational events in Guam, Australia, and New Zealand.

The group hosted prestigious competitions too with the biggest one being the Oceania Regional Championship in 2008. Three years before the regional event, NMA also brought the Micronesian Athletics Champi-

onship to Saipan and in this tournament, the CNMI managed to prepare sisters Yvonne and Yvette Bennett, Jacque Wonenberg, Lia Rangamar, Tyrone Omar, and others for tough regional competitions.

"The Oceania Athletic Championships was the biggest single sporting event ever held on Saipan. Oceania people at the time said it was the best OAC ever held, and they hold great ones every year. There were Olympic and world-class athletes here on Saipan. Valeria Adams, who won the gold medal in the shot put (21 meters) in the London Olympic Games, was here. Great sprinters and middle distance runners from Samoa and Papua New Guinea were also here. It was a very smooth running event. I know there were spectators that didn't want to leave after the last event. They wanted to see more of this high level type of competition," Barnes said.

"NMA had evolved into a powerful regional organization that was capable of hosting major track and field events. We were also blessed with several outstanding athletes and they lifted the face and reputation of NMA," he added.

According to Barnes, all these achievements were made possible because of four factors: quality coaches/administrators; quality athletes; great facilities; and funding.

"Certainly, the track and field facility at the Oleai Sports Complex was one of the two best all-weather track facilities in the entire Pacific Ocean, Fiji having the other one. Once NMA began using the new track, CNMI athletes obtained better athletes and superior performances," Barnes said.

Before the Oleai track was built in 2004, athletes used to train at Hopwood.

"When NMA used to train at Hopwood in the middle and late 1990s, athletes would get sore backs from running on the roly-poly Hopwood grass surface," Barnes said.

When it comes to the development of coaches and administrators and funding, NMA has the International Association of Athletics Federation and Oceania Athletics Association to thank.

"Since we became a member, IAAF has invested over a million dollars for the CNMI in developing qualified administrators, coaches, officials, and most specifically athletes. So monetary assistance from the IAAF for training and competition is the single biggest factor that got us to where we are today," said NMA developmental coach Elias Rangamar.

All Schools Championships

NMA is one of the few local associations with a regular calendar of events every year. These include the Saipan Marathon, CNMI National Championships, cross-country series, Turkey Trot Run, Christmas Island Relay, and the All Schools Championships.

The All Schools competition is NMA's most successful and well-attended event, with over 1,000 elementary, junior high, and high school students from both the public and private schools joining the tournament. With its huge annual turnout, NMA is forced to hold qualifiers for more than a month to select the finalists for the three-day tournament.

"The PSS/McDonald's All Schools Championship is a hit because of the number of participants from the grassroots level. Most of our national athletes, Tyrone, Yvonne, and Jacque, just to name a few, were discovered through this meet. The program is successful because it provides competition and participation for 5-year-olds up to the high school level with unlimited number of participants. In team sports, for example, say basketball, you can only take 12 players. The school has 300 plus kids and only 12 can represent the school, whereas in athletics, we have the ability to cater to everyone," Rangamar said.

Barnes said the All Schools concept began in the late 1960s at Hopwood.

"It started in 1968 and it was then called Junior Olympics. It used to be held for two days at Hopwood with the heats on Day 1 and finals the next day. When NMA moved to the new track, it allowed weeks of tryouts and then the finals are held over a three-day period," Barnes said.

New breed

With Wonenberg, the Bennett sisters, and Lia Rangamar now in college and Omar slowing down on competitions, NMA is developing new talents to keep CNMI athletics' high standing in the region.

Sprinter Rachel Abrams is one of them and is being groomed to follow in the footsteps of Micronesia's fastest woman, Yvonne Bennett. Abrams represented the CNMI in the 2009 Pacific Games in New Caledonia and made history in Noumea after becoming the first Commonwealth bet to advance to the finals of an athletics event (200m run). In middle distance running, NMA has Mike Mancao and Beo Ngirchongor.

The association hopes that besides these three athletes, more will come forward to join the program.

"The federation faces challenges and in some cases a struggle for survival. Our federation is in perpetual competition with other sports as well as with a growing number of leisure options to attract and retain participants, supporters, public interest, and resources. Indeed failure in this competition could mean that athletics is marginalized. Clearly, hard work, organization, skills, and vision on the part of NMA's leadership are critical to the success of our sports," said NMA current president Ramon Tebuteb.

Elementary school students race in the 400m run during the 2008 All Schools Championships at the Oleai Sports Complex.

ROSELYN B. MONROYO

HOLDING COURT

Saipan Bi Associati

A friend once said that a sport is not a sport if you can drink beer while playing it. He may be right but don't tell billiards aficionados on Saipan that their game is not a sport.

According to *A Brief History of the Noble Game of Billiards* by The Billiards Archive curator Mike Shamos, the sport evolved from a lawn game similar to croquet played sometime during the 15th century in Northern Europe, probably in France.

Shamos said the game was eventually moved indoors to a wooden table with green cloth to simulate grass. A simple border was then placed around the edges and the balls were shoved, rather than struck, with wooden sticks called "maces."

The origin of its nomenclature, meanwhile, according to Shamos, could very well be from the French term "billart"—one of the wooden sticks—or "bille"—a ball.

On Saipan, billiards is played year-round in the many sports bars and watering holes that dot the island.

In July 2005, the Saipan Billiards Association was formed to, in the words of its secretary Warlee Ellama, provide a venue for the island's aspiring pool players to show off their skills in a fair and honest competition.

"Our leagues are not money leagues where cash prizes are given out. [We] are fun leagues that enable camaraderie among the players and 'bragging rights' and trophies for the winners. All monies received are used for league expenses such as printing, trophies, awards banquet, etc. SBA leagues operate in a manner similar to our Saipan Electronics Dart Association," he said.

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

4

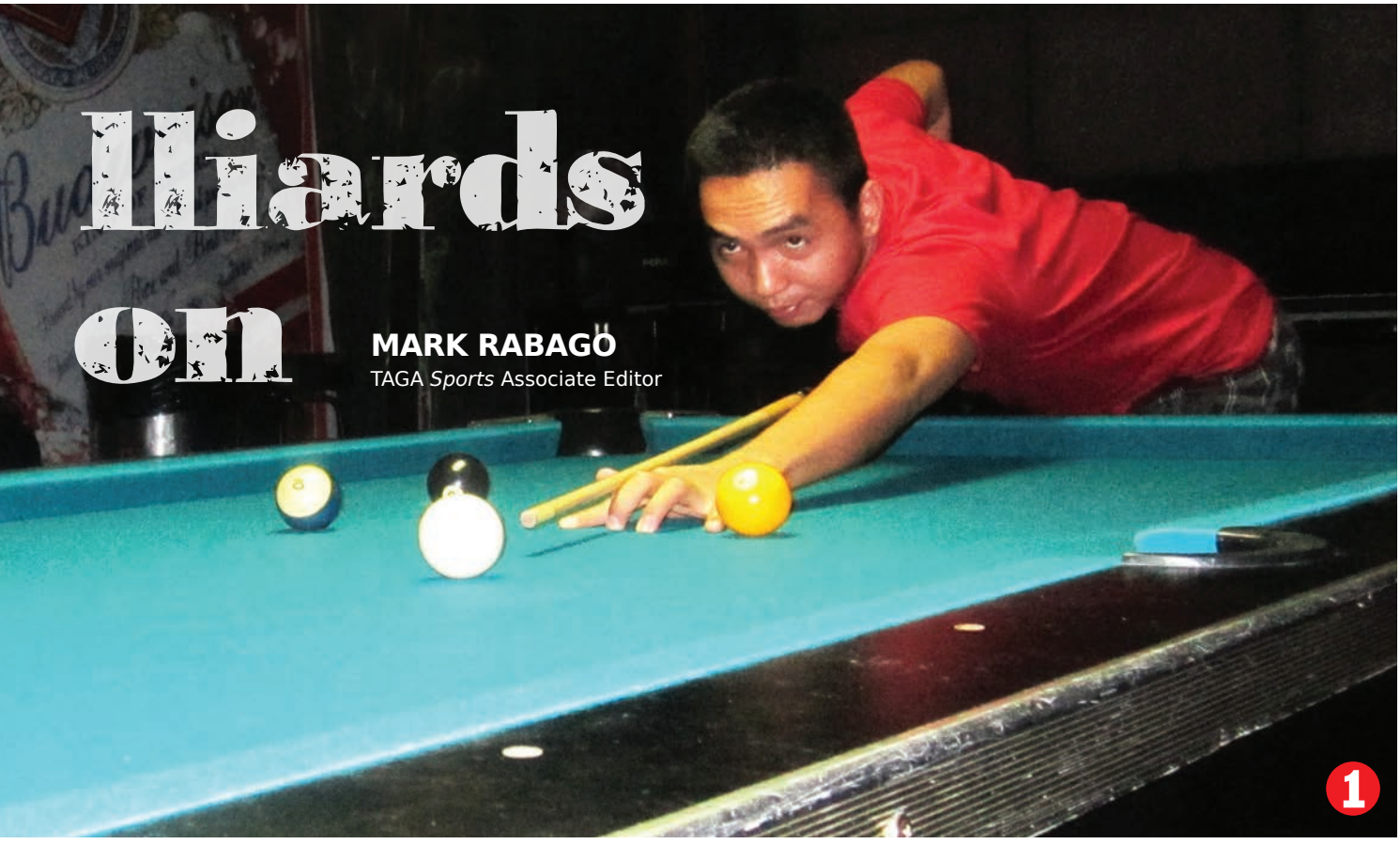
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

From eight teams in its inaugural season, SBA leagues have grown to an average of 14 teams every season, which are usually sponsored by many of Saipan's businesses. Some of the sponsors include IT&E, Docomo Pacific, and Saipan Computer Services, just to name a few and the venues are located in sports bars like Jonny's Bar & Grill, 19th Hole Bar & Grill, Poseidon Bar & Grill, Joe's Steak House, Oceanside Bar & Grill, SOS Bar & Grill, Wild Bill's Bar & Grill, The Waterfront, VFW Post 3457, Utopia Sports Bar, and Bammyss Restaurant.

Ellama said SBA leagues are unique because teams are divided into two groups—

Billiards on

MARK RABAGO
TAGA *Sports* Associate Editor



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Agingan and Obyan divisions. The former is for expert cue artists (what they usually call pool sharks), while the latter is for players still learning the ropes.

"The rankings are a simple A or B and are based on their lifetime SBA win-loss record. New players are ranked B but are soon re-evaluated as the season progresses. Each team is only allowed to have four A players in order to balance the skill of the competing teams. The teams can have a minimum of five players and a maximum of eight per team. Leagues compete twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays," he said.

So far, IT&E Voyagers has been the most dominant team in the more than seven years the SBA leagues have been in existence.

"The Agingan Division team, captained by Rolly Villanueva, has shown continued success. Perhaps with our new handicapping method, some other teams will jump to the forefront. Time will tell," he said.

In terms of individual success, Ellama noted that Chester Hamoy of the same IT&E Voyagers team has emerged as one of the league's best players.

"We have a lot of talented billiards players in SBA but I will give credit to Chester Hamoy. He has won the most valuable player award several times already. He seems to keep getting better every season. Certainly he is the man to beat," said the SBA Leagues secretary.

As for the SBA Leagues' plans for the future, Ellama said he hopes that the growth and success of the organization will be the same as its sister association, the Saipan Electronic Dart Association.

"SEDA has been around for almost 20 years and we currently have between 800 and 1,000 players joining annually—two seasons per year of approximately 50 teams of eight players each. While it's not likely that SBA will reach that level, we will try," he said.

1 Chester Hamoy has emerged as the most consistent pool player in the Saipan Billiards Association; **2** IT&E Voyagers pose with their collection of hardware after dominating anew a recent SBA tournament; **3** It is SBA's hope that its new handicapping system will allow other teams to better challenge totem pole team, IT&E Voyagers; **4** SBA secretary Warlee Ellama hopes the billiards group will mirror the success of the 20-year-old Saipan Electronic Darts Association.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

By **ROSELYN B. MONROYO**
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

JOSHUA TAITANO
still makes waves in the pool

The younger generation of Saipan Swim Club and Tsunami Saipan Swimming Center swimmers has been spending more than a decade chasing Joshua Taitano's long list of age group records.

Joshua who?

Well, now, that's a fair question for up-and-coming swimmers, being familiar only with the names of Rezne Wong, Kai Staal, Jonathan Sakovich, and Dean Palacios if you talk about the CNMI's record book (men's division).

I am also guilty of a similar blasphemy because, despite covering swimming competitions on Saipan for more than seven years, my knowledge about Taitano's achievements was limited to his records, nothing more.

Fortunately, TAGA *Sports* through SSC founder Bill Sakovich tracked down Taitano's current whereabouts after he left the island in the late '90s. Discover how Guam's loss became Saipan's gain when Taitano moved here, and how he is now living a full life in Hawaii.

Welcome addition

"Josh was a very good swimmer, one of the better ones Saipan had. He was developed mainly by Jeannie [Sakovich] as he started in Guam, then moved to Saipan when he was older," Bill Sakovich said.

The Yigo, Guam native first swam for Manhoben Swim Club when he was about 5 or 6 years old and relocated to Saipan with his parents, Joe and Angela, when he was 10.

"My mom swam for Guam when she was younger and my parents put me on Manhoben team. Swimming was my first organized sport. When we moved to Saipan, SSC had a solid reputation and I joined soon after arriving," said Taitano, who swam for SSC for seven years. In that span, he managed to represent the CNMI in various off-island tournaments.

"He did well at the Tahiti SPG, made it into the finals, although he did not medal. However, he did medal in the Micronesian Games and did participate in the Pacific School Games in Darwin, Australia and brought back medals," Sakovich said.

"All the large meets are memorable for me, as we traveled internationally or for a large invitational meet at least twice a year. SPGs or Pacific School Games in Australia were some of my favorites. They were the meets that really started to show me that I could have a future in the sport and how good we were as a team," Taitano said.

SSC family

Taitano remembers a long list of former SSC teammates and coaches; that's why the club is very dear to him.

"There was the Winkfield family [Jacoby, Audra, Tamiko, Jeremy], David Palacios, Justin Pierce and family, Robert and Jessica Jordan, Kristy Springer, Ryo Saso, Keoni Ichihara, Dean Palacios, Vanessa Kosack, Alexis and Sonja Kosack, Roberto Santos, Noriko Grandinetti, Xenavee Pangelinan, Tracy Feger, Anneka and Jonathan Sakovich, and Claudia Adriano. Bill and Jeannie were my coaches. Bobby Winkfield was a dryland trainer and coach. Also, Mike Villagomez and Ty Izuka were just starting to help out when they could," he said.

Taitano was proud and happy with what he and his teammates accomplished for SSC and the CNMI despite the limited resources and an outdated facility.

"With much respect to Mahoben Swim Club and coach Ching and coach San Agustin in Guam, SSC was the best overall team I've ever been blessed enough to be a member of. The swim team then really had a sense that the community was behind us. I remember when we used to return to the island and there'd be huge signs and banners inside the airport and you could see it on the plane, congratulating us and some showing our total medal counts for certain competitions," Taitano said.

"Swimming for SSC at that particular time really set me up for success to this day. SSC is easily the best program I've been a part of to include college. The dedication of the coaches and what they were able to achieve for the swimmers through the help of the parents and community was unmatched in my career. During my time with SSC, almost the entire advanced team would have qualified to swim at national qualifying events. To put it into perspective, Hawaii as a state has about 20 teams and only sends about 20 swimmers who qualify for those same events," he added.

Joshua Taitano poses with his Hawaii Swim Club swimmers before starting a training session in Oahu, Hawaii.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

BILL SAKOVICH

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Records galore

Taitano swam for SSC until junior high and at one point held 12 of the 16 records in the boys 11 to 12.

Before Tsunami Saipan's Kaito Yanai and Kensuke Kimura set new marks in the freestyle events in 2010 and 2007, respectively, Taitano owned all six records in freestyle swims (50m, 100m 200m, 400m, 800, and 1,500m). Add to these his marks in the 50m and 100m backstroke, the 50m and 100m butterfly, and the 200m and 400m individual medley. He also had a chunk in the boys 9 to 10 age group records list before SSC's Kento Akimaru and Yanai eclipsed them.

As of this writing, the former SSC swimmer's records in the boys 11 to 12 50m, 100m, and 200m freestyle, 50m backstroke, 50m and 100m butterfly, and 200m IM still stand since he made them in 1994.

Among his records and events, he considers the 200m IM marks his favorite.

"The 200 individual medley really shows the best all around athlete in swimming. It's a grueling race that's just outside of sprint distance. You swim all the strokes so it's more mentally and physically demanding than other events, where you can get into the rhythm with your stroke. IMers are the toughest people in the pool," Taitano said.

Collegiate career

After swimming for the CNMI and Guam, Taitano earned a scholarship from California Baptist University, an NCAA Division II school in Riverside, Southern California.

"I was a dual sport athlete for California Baptist University, joining swimming and water polo. I won multiple NAIA All-American honors in the 200yd and 400yd IM, 100yd and 200yd backstroke, 200yd freestyle, and some relays. I was also a member of California Baptist's nationally ranked water polo team," the former CBU Lancers swimmer said.

Taitano was listed in CBU's swimming all-time roster from 2000 to 2001 and helped the Lancers place second behind Simon Fraser in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. He was with CBU's first water polo team in 1999 and remained with the squad the following year. Taitano stayed with the Lancers for three and half years before joining the U.S. Coast Guard.

Aloha

TAGA *Sports* was first told that Taitano had returned to Guam after his stint with the U.S. Coast Guard in Honolulu, but Sakovich said the former SSC swimmer is still in Hawaii and is now into coaching.

Taitano lives in Kaimuki in Oahu with his wife Melissa and son Kainoa. Besides being a father and husband, he is also a coach, a boat captain, and a graduating student.

> The 200m individual medley swim consists of four strokes in one race. The swimmer starts with the 50m butterfly, followed by the 50m backstroke, 50m breaststroke, and finishes with the 50m freestyle.

"I am at University of Hawaii, graduating in the spring with a double major in Sustainability Studies and Economics. I also work as a boat captain and I am with the U.S. Coast Guard Reserves," said the Hawaii Swim Club coach.

"I coach for Hawaii Swim Club with about 30 kids at my location [the team has four total in Oahu and one in Maui] with ages ranging from 4 to 18. I coach mainly the intermediate and advanced/older group with just over 20 kids from 4th grade," Taitano said.

"Aside from the busy swim schedule with 2-3 meets a month, any free time I get I'm usually out surfing with my family or fishing somewhere," he added.

Coaching

Although Taitano has been in the sport for more than a decade and coached for a while, his first day at the pool with a bunch of swimmers was not without some trepidation.

"The first time I had the pool to myself and my team, it was nerve-wracking. Seeing 2-3 dozen sets of goggles waiting for you and your instructions tested me," Taitano said.

Sakovich did not see Taitano coaching, but he did not have any second thoughts about finding the latter a coaching post in Hawaii.

"When Josh left Saipan we had no idea he would end up coaching, although he was a good swim instructor when we conducted our summer swim lessons. With his experience competing for us and teaching lessons, we did feel he learned a lot and he would be able to go into the coaching market. When Josh left the Coast Guard, he told us he would like to live and finish school in Honolulu and he is interested in coaching," Sakovich said.

Taitano said former Saipan swimmers who returned to the island during summer vacations to teach children inspired him to go into coaching, too.

"With SSC, we did yearly swim programs where the swimmers were instructors too, so we were shown that side early on and it was a natural progression as I moved away from competition," said Taitano, who sees coaching as harder that competing.

"When you're a competitor, your focus is only on yourself, your preparation, training, rest, feel, etc. You don't need to be sharp all the time because you can rely on the workout and teammates and the vibe of the practice to get you through a rough session," he said. "As a coach, you are responsible for more than just the practice routine. You have to communicate well with the kids, adolescents, teenagers, and their parents."

Now that he is a coach, Taitano appreciates more his former mentors and teammates.

"I should have treated my coaches better, listened and appreciated them more. Being older now and seeing the other side of it, I'm humbled by what my coaches did for me all those years. Thanks for all the memories. Thanks for some of the best times of my life," he said.

LEFT PHOTO: Members of the CNMI Swim Team to the 1995 Tahiti South Pacific Games, from left, David Palacios, Joshua Taitano, Jacoby Winkfield, Robert Jordan, Jessica Jordan, Anneka Sakovich, Noriko Grandinetti, Vanessa Kosack, and Jennifer Furey. **RIGHT PHOTO:** Joshua Taitano (in glasses) poses with members of Marianas Team during the open water event in the 1999 South Pacific Games in Guam.

My London Olympics experience

KEN OREJOLA
Contributing Writer

Ken Orejola has been with the Manta Ray Band since his sophomore year and is currently its president. He plays the baritone saxophone. He was born on Feb. 12, 1995 and is 17 years old.

The Olympic Games logo hangs from the world famous Tower Bridge of London.

KEN OREJOLA

I never really thought that someone from Saipan would be able to go to any Olympic Games to represent the CNMI. And if there would be one to represent, it would be probably someone older.

When we got the invitation from World Projects (the organization that put together the band competition), we were really excited! It was a bittersweet moment for all of us. We were happy because we got invited, but sad because of the amount we had to raise just to get there. When Mr. Will DeWitt told us we had to raise $250,000, I honestly believed we wouldn't have that money.

At first people didn't really notice us and it was really hard. For the first five months we had very little money in our band account, and it wasn't until two months before we left when the money started coming in.

I wasn't really excited when the days got closer, not until I was checking in my luggage at the airport. That was when it finally dawned on me—we were actually going to London! It took us 48 hours to get there. I hated the plane ride, but when we finally touched down, we were all pretty stoked. We couldn't wait to get out of the airplane.

When we got on our coaches and were headed to the Olympic Park to get our accreditation ID's, I really couldn't believe my eyes. How London looked was really different from how Saipan looks. There were big buildings everywhere, nice cars, big golden statues, bridges, and those Harry Potter houses you see in the movies. I was also freaking out on how we were driving on the left side of the road and how the drivers drove from the right side of the car.

But I never really thought about having fun until we finish what we had to do. When the day finally came I was really nervous, thinking whether we would be good enough to bring home the gold. We practiced 13 months just for this one performance. When the lady came and told us that it was our turn to go up and play, that was when I was focused. I prayed before I got up to the stage.

I really believe we played our best that night. Song after song, it was just amazing. Looking at the judges' table after we played one song, the happy faces they had on just really brought more confidence in me. Well, most of the judges were smiling and really happy—everyone but one. He was like those hard-to-impress kind of guy.

After we were done, we watched the other bands and singers go up. We then had dinner, followed by the awarding ceremony. When the guy called Mr. DeWitt up to the stage we were all so quiet, waiting for what he had to say. He told the people about how long our journey was just to get to London. He then told us that we won silver. Honestly, I was really disappointed. I really believed that we won gold. Everyone believed we did, even our competition. But I realized that we beat a group from L.A and a group from London, so that made me happy again. My friend Herman and I then started chanting our school chant. MANTA MANTA MANTA RAY RAY RAY! We filled the whole auditorium with Manta pride.

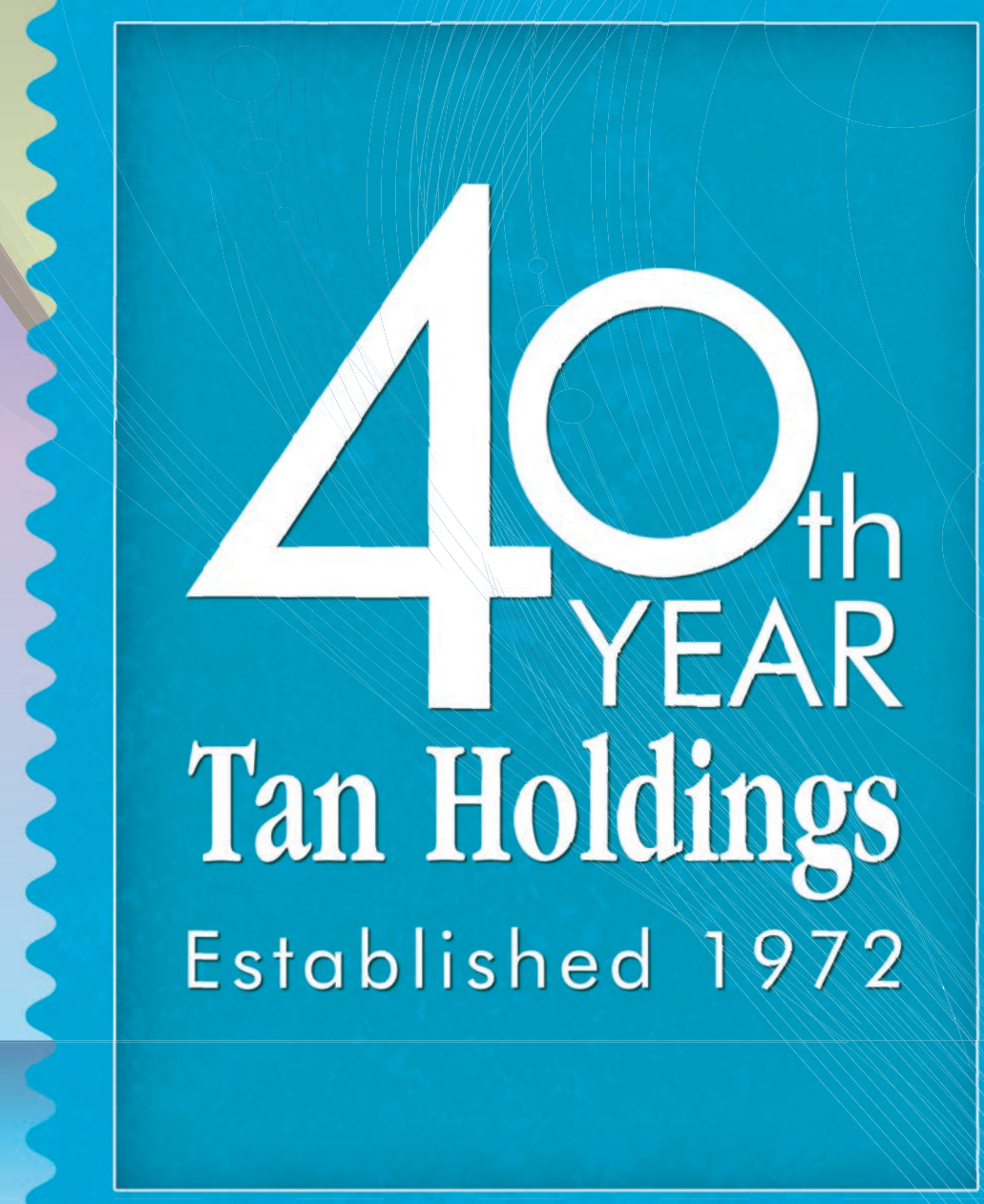
We then watched the opening ceremony of the London Olympics. It was funny and really nice. We could hear the fireworks from our hotel and we were about an hour away from the Olympic Park. It was pretty cool.

We had other concerts while we were in London. We played for the passing of the torch ceremony. It was really awesome. There were big buses and a lot of people. They heard us play and were amazed by us. We then played at the park where they held the cycling events and that was pretty fun too. I think that was the hottest day since we first arrived in London.

Our last performance was my favorite and that was when we played in the bandstand of the Olympic Park. There were a lot of people. We saw people dancing while we were playing our pop music. After we were done, people came up to us and asked about Saipan. They told us they would visit us soon. We were given an hour to roam around the park, but an hour wasn't enough. The park was so BIG! It was like entering another world! You had to go through Customs just to get in the park. It had the biggest McDonald's in the world. It was really nice and cold! Really cold!

After that night we went sightseeing. We went to the Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace, the London Eye, a cruise on the Thames, the Stonehenge, and other really nice places in London.

As the days passed, we slowly became sad. We couldn't believe we had to leave London. To me this was the greatest, the best experience of my life so far. Even if we didn't bring home the gold, I'm still happy we brought home the silver.



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